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# What is Progressive Islam?

OMID SAFI

Progressive Islam encompasses a number of themes: striving to realize a just and pluralistic society through a critical engagement with Islam, a relentless pursuit of social justice, an emphasis on gender equality as a foundation of human rights, and a vision of religious and ethnic pluralism.

## Muslim libera(c)tion:

Progressive Muslims perceive themselves as the advocates of human beings all over the world who, through no fault of their own, live in situations of perpetual poverty, pollution, oppression, and marginalization. Their task is to give voice to the voiceless, power to the powerless, and confront the 'powers that be' who disregard the God-given human dignity of the *mus-tad'afun* all over this Earth. Muslim progressives draw on the strong tradition of social justice from within Islam from sources as diverse as the Qur'an and *hadith* to more recent authorities and spokespersons such as Shari'ati. Their methodological fluidity is apparent in their pluralistic epistemology, which freely and openly draws from sources outside of Islamic tradition which can serve as useful tools in the global pursuit of justice. These external sources include the liberation theology of Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and Rebecca S. Chopp, as well as the secular humanism of Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, etc. Progressive Muslims are likely to combine a Qur'anic call for serving as 'witnesses for God in justice' (Qur'an 42:15), with an Edward Said-ian call to 'speak truth to the powers.'

The question, asked by Peter Mandaville,<sup>2</sup> whether progressive Muslims reflect or initiate larger social processes of transformations, is a non-starter as it is premised on an initial dichotomy between intellectual pursuit and activism that progressives do not accept. Whereas many (though not all) of the previous generations of 'liberal' Muslims were at times defined by a purely academic approach that reflected their elite status, progressive Muslims fully realize that the social injustices around them are reflected in, connected to, and justified in terms of intellectual discourses. They are, in this respect, fully indebted to the majestic criticism of Edward Said. Progressive Muslims are concerned not simply with laying out a fantastic, beatific vision of social justice and peace, but also with transforming hearts and societies alike. A progressive commitment implies by necessity the willingness to remain engaged with the issues of social justice as they unfold on the ground level, in the lived realities of Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

Progressive Muslims follow squarely in the footsteps of liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff, who deemed a purely conceptual criticism of theology, devoid of any real commitment to the oppressed, as 'radically irrelevant.'<sup>3</sup> Boff recognized that *liberação* (liberation) links the concepts *liber* (free) and *ação* (action):<sup>4</sup> There is no liberation without action. In drawing on both Boff as well as Rebecca Chopp, I have before stated that: 'Vision and activism are both necessary. Activism without vision is doomed from the start. Vision without activism quickly be-

**The various understandings of Islam which fall under the rubric of 'progressive' are both continuations of, and radical departures from, the hundred and fifty year old tradition of liberal Islam.<sup>1</sup> Liberal advocates of Islam generally display an uncritical, almost devotional identification with modernity, and often (but do not always) by-pass discussions of colonialism and imperialism. Progressive advocates of Islam, on the other hand, are almost uniformly critical of colonialism, both of its nineteenth century manifestation and its current variety. Progressive Muslims espouse a critical and non-apologetic 'multiple critique' with respect to both Islam and modernity. They are undoubtedly post-modern in the sense of their critical approach to modernity. That double engagement with the varieties of Islam and modernity, plus an emphasis on concrete social action and transformation, is the defining characteristic of progressive Islam today.**

comes irrelevant.'<sup>5</sup> This informed social activism is visible in many progressive Muslim organizations and movements ranging from the work of Chandra Muzaffar with the International Movement for a Just World in Malaysia,<sup>6</sup> the efforts of Farid Esack with HIV-positive Muslims in South Africa,<sup>7</sup> to the work of the recent Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Shirin Ebadi<sup>8</sup> with groups such as the Iranian Children's Rights Society.<sup>9</sup> It is thus not the case that only certain 'superstars' among progressive Muslims occupy themselves with activist approaches. One only need spend some time talking with the many individuals who are active in the various progressive Muslim organizations to witness the astonishing array of peace and social justice movements, grassroots organizations, human rights efforts, etc., that they are involved in.

## Progressive Islam as an Islamic humanism

At the heart of a progressive Muslim interpretation is a simple yet radical idea: every human individual, female or male, Muslim or non-Muslim, rich or poor, northerner or southerner, has exactly the same intrinsic worth. The essential value of human life is God-given, and is in no way connected to culture, geography, or privilege. A progressive Muslim is one who is committed to the strangely controversial idea that the true measure of a human being's worth is a person's character, and not the oil under their soil or their particular flag. A progressive Muslim agenda is concerned with the ramifications of the premise that all members of the human race have this same intrinsic worth because each of us has the breath of God breathed into our being: *wa nafakhtu fih min ruhi*. (Qur'an 15:29 and 38:72). This identification with the full humanity of all human beings amounts to nothing short of an Islamic Humanism.

An increasing number of those who advocate such a humanistic framework within the context of Islam have self-labelled themselves progressive Muslims. 'Progressive' refers to a relentless striving towards a universal notion of justice in which no single community's prosperity, righteousness, and dignity come at the expense of another's. Adherents of progressive Islam conceive of a way of being Muslim that engages and affirms the humanity of all human beings, that actively holds all of us responsible for a fair and just distribution of our God-given natural resources, and that seeks to live in harmony with the natural world.

## Engaging tradition

Progressive Muslims insist on a serious engagement with the full spectrum of Islamic thought and practices. There can be no progressive Muslim movement that does not engage the very 'stuff' (textual and material sources) of the Islamic tradition, even if some wish to debate what 'stuff' this should be and how it ought to be interpreted. Progressives generally maintain that it is imperative to work through the inherited traditions of thought and practice. In particular cases, they might conclude that certain pre-existing interpretations fail to offer us sufficient guidance today. However, they can only faithfully claim that position after—and not before—a serious engagement with the tradition. To move beyond problematic past and present interpretations of Islam, progressive Muslims have to pass critically through them and experience them first-hand.

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Justice lies at the heart of Islamic social ethics. Time and again the Qur'an talks about providing for the marginalized members of society: the poor, the orphaned, the downtrodden, the wayfarer, the hungry, etc. Progressive Muslims believe that it is time to 'translate' the social ideals in the Qur'an and Islamic teachings into a way of action that those committed to social justice today can relate to and understand. For all Muslims, there is the vibrant memory of the Prophet repeatedly talking about a real believer as one whose neighbour does not go to bed hungry. Progressives hold that in today's global village it is time to consider all of humanity as our neighbor. The time has come for Muslims who wish to be true believers to be responsible for the well-being and dignity of all human beings.

Progressive Muslims begin with a simple yet radical stance: that the Muslim community as a whole cannot achieve justice unless justice is guaranteed for Muslim women. In short, there can be no progressive interpretation of Islam without gender justice. Gender justice is crucial, indispensable, and essential. In the long run, any progressive Muslim interpretation will be judged based on the amount of change in gender equality it is able to produce in small and large communities. Gender equality is a measuring stick for the broader concerns of social justice and pluralism. As Shirin Ebadi has stated, it is imperative to conceive of women's rights as human rights. Progressive Muslims strive for pluralism both inside and outside of the *umma*. They seek to open up a wider spectrum of interpretations and practices considered Muslim, and epistemologically follow a pluralistic approach to the pursuit of knowledge and truth. In their interactions with other religious and ethnic communities, they seek to transcend the arcane notions of 'tolerance', and instead strive for a profound engagement through both existing commonalities and differences.

## Is this an 'Islamic Reformation'?

Progressive Muslims are often asked whether their project constitutes an 'Islamic reformation.' The answer is both yes and no. It is undeniably true that there are serious economic, social, and political issues in the Muslim world that need urgent remedying. Much of the Muslim world is bound to a deeply disturbing economic structure in which it provides natural resources for the global market, while at the same time remaining dependent on Western labour, technological know-how, and staple goods. This deplorable economic situation is exacerbated in many parts of the modern Muslim world by atrocious human rights situations, crumbling educational systems, and worn-out economies. Most progressive Muslims would readily support the reform of all those institutions. However, the term 'reformation' carries considerably more baggage than that. In speaking of the 'Islamic reformation', many people have in mind the Protestant Reformation. It is this understanding that leaves many progressive Muslims feeling uneasy, for theirs is not a project of developing a 'Protestant' Islam distinct from a 'Catholic' Islam. Most insist that they are not looking to create a further split within the Muslim community so much as to heal this split and to urge it along.

## A global phenomenon or an American Islam?

It would be a clear mistake to somehow reduce the emergence of progressive Islam to being a new 'American Islam.' Progressive Muslims are found everywhere in the global Muslim *umma*. When it comes to actually implementing a progressive understanding of Islam in Muslim communities, particular communities in Iran, Malaysia, and South Africa are *leading*, not following, the United States. Many American Muslim communities—and much of the leadership represented by groups such as the Islamic Circle of North America,<sup>10</sup> the Islamic Society of North America,<sup>11</sup> and the Council on American-Islamic Relations<sup>12</sup>—

are far too uncritical of Salafi and Wahhabi tendencies that progressives oppose. Lastly, almost all progressive Muslims are profoundly skeptical of nationalism, whether American, Arab, Iranian, or otherwise. As such, they instinctively and deliberately reject the appropriation of this fluid global movement by those who espouse it in order to transform it into an 'American Islam' commodity to be exported all over the world. The progressives' firm critique of neo-colonialism is also a way to avoid their appropriation by the United States' administration, which has used the language of reforming Islam to justify its invasion of Muslim countries such as Iraq.

## Progressive Muslim Networks

Perhaps the most exciting part of the new emerging global Muslim progressive identity is that progressives everywhere are seeking one another out, reading each other's work, collaborating with one another's organizations. This is a fruitful process of cross-pollination. One can point to the impact that Shari'ati has had on South African Muslims, or the impact the Palestinian struggle has had on South East Asian progressives. Much of this contact is taking place via e-mail. We are clearly in the initial stages of this formulation, and it is an exciting process which has the promise of ushering in a real paradigm shift in the relationship of Muslims to both Islam and modernity.

### Notes

1. See Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
2. See *ISIM Newsletter* 12 (June 2003), p.24–25
3. Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, (1987; reprint, Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), p.9.
4. Boff, p.10.
5. Omid Safi, 'The Times They are a-Changin': A Muslim Quest for Justice, Gender Equality, and Pluralism', in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, edited by Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), p. 6–7.
6. <http://www.just-international.org>
7. <http://www.positivemuslims.org.za>, see also *ISIM Newsletter* 12 (June 2003), p.40–41
8. <http://www.muslimwakeup.com/mainarchive/000242.php>
9. <http://www.iranianchildren.org/index.html>
10. <http://www.icna.com>
11. <http://www.isna.net>
12. <http://www.cair-net.org>

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**Welcome for Shirin Ebadi upon her arrival to Tehran's Mehr-Abad airport, 14 October 2003.**